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TAGS: PREL CASC OFDP ASEC BO

SUBJECT: REGIME RENEWS DEMAND FOR EMBASSY STAFF CUT

REF: VILNIUS 209 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) MFA Americas Department Chief Vadim Lazerko called in Charge April 23 to renew previous calls for mutual cuts in diplomatic staff to six -- the Ambassador and one slot reserved for ambassadors currently on consultations. He said that the reason for such a move was the lack of readiness by the U.S. to accept GOB proposals for amelioration of bilateral relations made at recent talks in Brussels (reftel). Lazerko asked Charge to present a list by 3:00 p.m. local time April 30 of the American staff that would remain in Belarus. Further, he warned that failure to provide a list at that time would result in receipt of a list from the MFA of five U.S. diplomats who would be allowed to remain, with the others declared "persona non grata." Lazerko confirmed with Charge that the exact number of U.S. diplomats currently present in Belarus is fifteen.

¶2. (SBU) In response, Charge noted forcefully that Belarus' decision to call for mutual staff cuts to diplomatic missions was a grave mistake, one that would have consequences not only for our bilateral relationship but for Belarus as well. Charge told Lazerko that he would relay this information to Washington and expected to present an answer April 30.

Charge Raises Zeltser, Kim, Harassment of Diplomats

¶3. (SBU) Charge took the opportunity of the meeting with Ambassador Lazerko to raise other issues of importance in our bilateral relationship. He repeated calls made by the Department and post for the urgent restoration of regular consular access to imprisoned AMCIT Emanuel Zeltser, adding that the Belarusian Charge would be called in to the Department for a message on this topic April 23. Charge reminded Lazerko that recent official communications from the Belarusian side had indicated that access to Zeltser would not be possible prior to April 30. Charge added that the American side considered such a delay unacceptable, particularly in light of reports of the state of Zeltser's health. The Belarusian side's "proposal" to report staff cuts by April 30 made delays in granting access to Zeltser all the more unacceptable, according to the Charge, who asked the MFA to work with the Belarusian KGB to establish consular access to Zeltser as soon as possible. Lazerko made no reply.

¶4. (SBU) Charge also protested the increasing levels of harassment of American diplomats in Minsk by the BKGB, including four approaches to one diplomat in the last two weeks. Charge said that these approaches included physical contact, veiled threats and mentions of the U.S. diplomat's family.

¶5. (SBU) Finally, Charge raised the April 22 conviction of Andrey

Kim. Charge reiterated the importance the USG placed on the release of all political prisoners in Belarus, noting that yesterday's creation of a second political prisoner would do nothing but harm Belarusian-U.S. relations.

¶6. (SBU) In response, Lazerko promised to pass all of this information on to his superiors. On the issue of the conviction and sentencing of Andrey Kim, Lazerko asserted that informing his superiors was all the action that was possible, as "the judicial system in Belarus is independent."

Comment

¶7. (SBU) The GOB's decision to reiterate its call for mutual reductions in staff comes just one day after the 18-month sentence for Andrey Kim, Belarus' second political prisoner (septel). This confluence of events confirms that the regime is not prepared to make any practical steps towards political reform.

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